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AUTHOR Trupin, Eric W.; Selby, Peter M.; McCauley, Elizabeth; Farmer, Ira G., Jr.; Lebeda, Susan B.

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Prime Time Project, a Washington-based project which is a comprehensive intervention model for youths who are at the extreme end of the juvenile justice continuum due to their history of repeat offending, relatively severe offenses, a high degree of isolation or abandonment from their natural community, and the co-occurrence of mental health disorder. The project makes contact with youth and their families while the youth are detained and then follows them into the community upon release. Project staff have developed close collaborative relationships with juvenile court judges, probation and parole officers, local police officials, and teachers and administrators. Prime Time Project activities include: (1) structured half-day and evening activities located in a local community center; (2) vocational training, including two or more days each week involved in hands-on job skills training; (3) one or two days per week in training modules targeting areas such as social skills, affect management, interpersonal problem-solving, and drug and alcohol abuse; and (4) one evening per week, youth and a parent attend a group meeting. (CR)

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Introduction

The Prime Time Project is a comprehensive intervention model for youths who are at the extreme end of the juvenile justice continuum due to their history of repeat offending, relatively severe offenses, a high degree of isolation or abandonment from their natural community, and the co-occurrence of mental health disorder. Prime Time was initiated in the fall of 1995 in King County, Washington. Faced with rising juvenile crime and violence, increasing public concern, and a corresponding rise in demands placed on the county juvenile justice system, county officials have voiced a high level of interest in alternative, or enhanced, services to address juvenile crime. The county council awarded a two-year grant, recognizing that effective interventions exist and that linkages and collaboration between agencies and service providers play a role in successful intervention. The goals negotiated with the county were simple: (a) reduce recidivism, (b) reduce severity of violent and other offending behavior, (c) increase school attendance and performance, and (d) increase residential stability. The county council also mandated that we target those youth in the "deep end" of the juvenile offender population. This translated to the following entrance criteria for youth in the program: (a) currently in detention; (b) age 12 to 17; (c) at least two admissions to detention; (d) adjudicated for a relatively serious offense (e.g., assault, burglary, vehicular homicide, etc.); and (e) presence of a diagnosable mental health disorder.

Theoretical Background

Social-ecological models explain delinquent behavior as multiply determined by interactions between genetic,

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psychiatric or psychological variables, and key elements of the environment such as family, school, peers, and other systems. Accepting this approach, we found more specific guidance in Patterson's (1982) explication of a "coercive cycle" in aggressive children's antisocial interactions. Patterson described an interaction pattern in which a youth's antisocial behavior is followed by the parent's negative reactions. This, in turn, escalates the youth's antisocial, aggressive behavior, triggering a cycle that is both cause and effect.

With Patterson's model in mind, we noticed a striking pattern of coercive exchanges across a wide range of systems in which juvenile offenders interact. For many of these youths, reciprocal coercive exchanges characterize interactions with family members, teachers and other school officials, and members of the community. Once referred to the juvenile justice system, the youth's interactions with police, courts, detention staff, and probation and parole officials are often coercive in nature. Building on the reciprocal effects and negative reinforcement described in Patterson's model, it followed that an intervention which broke the "coercive cycle" might be effective in enhancing pro-social behavior and reducing offending.

We were also impressed by the success of the Multisystemic Therapy Model of Henggeler and Borduin (1990) and set out to fashion our intervention after their model. Specifically, we sought to design a family-based therapeutic intervention that would integrate affective, cognitive, and social interventions, be community-based, incorporate case advocacy, and involve youths and families in treatment planning and implementation.

Boundary Spanning and Collaboration

In light of the multiple systems in which juvenile offending youth are involved, and guided by Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP; Stroul & Friedman, 1986) principles, we framed program development in terms of the Jericho Principle (Melton, 1989). The Jericho Principle is a metaphor, suggesting that walls should come tumbling down between disciplines, or sectors, of the child and family service system.

Collaboration with Families

Although many families, for both obvious and subtle reasons, are unable to provide consistent support for their children, we place a strong emphasis on collaboration with parents and families when possible. Families are contacted while youths are in detention. Meetings, for assessment, treatment planning and counseling, begin at that point. Families are involved in developing a structured transition back to the community, and in fine-tuning services to meet their specific strengths and needs.

Collaboration with the Juvenile Justice System

The Prime Time Project is based out of the King County Department of Youth Services (DYS) and a nearby community health clinic. Therapist/case managers of the Prime Time Project make contact with youth and families while the youth are detained and then follow them into the community upon release. Through our physical placement within juvenile detention, we have watched and perceived some walls to have buckled, although not totally collapsed, between the juvenile justice and mental health system.

Judges

Close collaboration with judges has afforded us a high degree of involvement in judicial disposition planning. Juvenile court judges refer youths to our program and invite our recommendations as to disposition planning. Eager for an expanded set of options for these troubled youth, judges have enthusiastically welcomed our efforts to demolish the metaphoric wall between the justice and mental health system.

Probation Counselors

Similarly, program staff have developed close collaborative relationships with probation and parole officers. The leveling of this wall has facilitated the design of a seamless approach to behavior management across systems and permitted more consistent monitoring of youth's participation and compliance in treatment, school, or vocational activities. Probation officers have welcomed the involvement of mental health professionals, leading to the construction of detailed probation orders tied to established principles of behavior management.

Collaboration with Police

Working closely with probation counselors, we have found that responding to youths' non-compliance with a warrant and brief detention may serve as an effective container, in both the literal and therapeutic sense. Recently, we have been able to forge a collaborative alliance with local police officials.

Collaboration with Schools

While education represents an important avenue of change for youth in the juvenile justice system, school has often been the setting for repeated failure, both socially and in the classroom. Among participants in the Prime Time Project, few are enrolled in school upon release from detention, and almost all have a history of multiple suspensions or expulsions. Collaboration with teachers and administrators is vital to facilitating youths' re-entry into the education system.

The Prime Time "Day Time" Program: A Transitional Community

In light of the degree to which many youths are extruded from their communities and lack many of the competencies necessary to social, academic, and vocational success, it should be useful to put in place a set of structures to facilitate youths' transition towards broader community involvement. To this end, the Prime Time Project incorporates a series of structured group activities. These activities do not take the place of intensive family-based (when possible), eco-systemic intervention. Instead, they serve as a transitional community for some youths and as an adjunct for others.

Prime Time activities seek to provide additional structure and external control for youths who both have too much time on their hands and too little capacity for impulse-control. Involvement in these activities offers a respite from the youth's involvement in coercive interactions, allowing them to practice alternative, pro-social styles. Some youths benefit from a graduated return from detention (where many report feeling quite safe as a function of the structure inherent in the setting), to the community, where risks are greater and external controls limited. The structured daily activities may serve as the venue for the "in vivo" transfer of vocational, academic, and social skills in a setting located in the community, while featuring opportunities for structured, pro-social interaction. Finally, by designing activities that proceed through a series of stages, youth are given the opportunity to follow a graduated pathway of success experiences leading to increasing community involvement.

This aspect of the intervention takes the form of structured half-day and evening activities located in a local community center under the umbrella of the community health clinic in which the program is based. Vocational training forms the centerpiece; youths spend two or more days each week involved in hands-on job skills training. Youths begin with a set of job readiness and basic skill building activities, moving through a series of stages to employment in the community. Youths also participate one or two days per week in training modules targeting areas such as social skills, affect management, interpersonal problem solving, and drug and alcohol abuse.

One evening per week, youths and a parent (or involved adult) attend a group meeting. Participants and program staff share a meal together before breaking up into separate parent and youth groups. After youths and adults break into groups, youths engage in a series of activities designed to afford an opportunity to practice pro-social interactions while working on tasks centered around identity development. In an adjoining room, parents receive training in communication and behavior management.

Research

Currently, a pilot study with 25 youths is being conducted. This study is designed to (a) give information about the population being served, (b) explore the effectiveness of the enrollment and data collection procedures that have been implemented, and (c) give a preliminary indication of the effectiveness of the intervention in reaching desired outcomes. This pilot study will also guide the preparation of a proposal for a larger, outcome-based evaluation.

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Authors

Eric W. Trupin, Ph.D.
Professor and Vice Chair
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Director, Division of Community Psychiatry
Acting Director, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
Box 359300, CH-13
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195
Voice: 206/526-2162
trupin@u.washington.edu

Peter M. Selby, Ph.D.
Fellow
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Box 359300, CN-06
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195
Voice: 206/526-2162

pselby@u.washington.edu

Elizabeth McCauley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Box 359300
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195
Voice: 206/526-2165
emccau@chmc.org

Ira G. Farmer, Jr.
Odessa Brown Children's Clinic
2101 E. Yesler Way
Seattle, WA 98122
Voice: 206/329-7870
ifarme@chmc.org

Susan B. Lebeda, MSW
Odessa Brown Children's Clinic
2101 E. Yesler Way
Seattle, WA 98122
Voice: 206/329-7870
slebed@chmc.org

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